

# Planners Imagine a More Walkable Montgomery

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The future of Montgomery, county planners say, lies in turning sprawl into city.

The planners propose redeveloping parts of Rockville Pike and other commercial centers into dense complexes that combine housing, offices and stores on a walkable scale.

The concept is similar to Fairfax County's plan to create urban hubs at Tysons Corner, the Vienna Metro stop and elsewhere.

In a far-reaching review of the way Montgomery guides growth, the Department of Park and Planning is circulating a draft document that would shape the county's transition "from a largely auto-dependent suburb into a more urban form."

The review could lead to an updating of the general plan — known as "On Wedges and Corridors" — that has prescribed the pattern of growth in Montgomery since 1964 and was last refined in 1993.

The new document makes the idea of "smart growth," which promotes higher-density development around points of access to mass transit, the heart of Montgomery's vi-

sion of itself. "We know we can't build our way out of congestion, but what we can do is build communities where people will be less dependent on the automobile," said Planning Board Chairman Derick Berlage.

Some of the higher-density development would occur in areas with Metro stops, such as Glenmont, Wheaton and White Flint, the last of

which straddles Rockville Pike. But shopping centers without Metro access might also lend themselves to redevelopment, Berlage said, including those in the Westbard Avenue area of Bethesda and White Oak, although at lower density. "We hope these off-rail centers will be better served by bus transit," he said.

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# Montgomery Planners Think Up, Not Out

PLANNERS, From B1

In addition to promoting development of urbanized "centers," the draft document envisions turning some of the county's big roads into "boulevards" that would be more appealing to pedestrians and less like highways.

Berlage cited Rockville Pike, Georgia Avenue and University Boulevard as roads that could be redesigned to include bus lanes, bicycle paths, better landscaping and wider sidewalks. He acknowledged that traffic would not move along redeveloped boulevards as quickly as it does now, a prospect that Richard Parsons, president of the county Chamber of Commerce, called "laughable in its unreality."

Parsons, who has participated in discussions with the planners, said he was critical of one early draft because it neglected the need to increase transportation capacity even as it proposed increasing density in parts of the county.

The planners' "visioning" effort, the initial stage of a process that could last years, is founded on the recognition that a land shortage is forcing the county to build upward. This year, the County Council approved the mixed-use redevelopment — with stores, offices and

housing in multistory buildings — of the Woodmont Triangle section of Bethesda and around the Shady Grove Metro station. The latter is a proposed urban center.

The move toward vertical, urban-style redevelopment is occurring throughout Washington's older suburbs. Last week, the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors gave permission to a developer to turn a neighborhood of 65 single-family homes near the Vienna Metro station into a complex of mid- and high-rise buildings with 2,250 units.

Montgomery County Council President George L. Leventhal (D-At Large) said he supports the draft document's vision of targeted urbanization. "As a concept, I buy it," he said, citing residents who have approached him about their desire to see improvements at certain shopping centers. "This is the next frontier of smart growth."

But other members are skeptical of the review's broad sweep and shortage of details. Council member Marilyn Praisner (D-Eastern County) said future versions need to be "drilled down and less broad."

Council member Nancy Floreen (D-At Large) said the Planning

Board would be better off concentrating on cleaning up its development review process, which has been sharply criticized after the discovery last year that hundreds of structures built in Clarksburg violated height and setback rules.

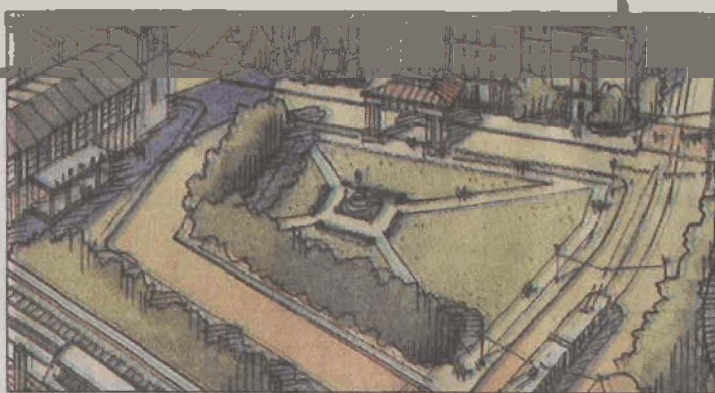
"I'm not sure I'd put a lot of priority on big-picture planning right this minute," Floreen said.

Berlage, who in the face of criticism related to Clarksburg has described his role as providing vision rather than day-to-day oversight, said it is important to deal with "the crisis of the moment." But he added: "If we were to park visioning because of that, that would be the worst thing we could do."

The council is set to decide in June whether to reappoint or replace Berlage.

Colleen Aycock of North Potomac, who arrived in the county in 2000 and is president of the Gaithersburg Rotary Club, said Montgomery today reminds her of Los Angeles when she lived there 30 years ago. "It's only a matter of time before it's one big city," she said of her new home.

To stave off that outcome, Montgomery wants to safeguard its agricultural reserve — the bucolic third of the county that is off-limits to dense development — and estab-



MONTGOMERY COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF PARK AND PLANNING

**An artist's rendering shows a proposed high-density development in Shady Grove, one of several potential urban centers.**

lished neighborhoods of single-family homes, which constitute another third or so of the county's land area. But it must also prepare for an estimated influx of more than 200,000 people over the next quarter-century, on top of an existing population of nearly 930,000.

There is less and less room to build big. Only one or two sites remain in the county that could accommodate a development on the scale of, for instance, Rockville's 3,200-unit King Farm.

That is why planners are encouraging the higher-density redevelopment of some commercial areas in the remaining third of the county — at least as a starting point for conversation in public meetings

scheduled for May.

One key question, said Pamela Lindstrom, a Sierra Club activist and Gaithersburg resident who has taken part in planners' discussions, is whether people are "going to live in Frederick County and West Virginia and commute to jobs here, or are we going to provide more housing?"

Melissa Banach, chief of the strategic planning division at the planning department, said: "There's no easy answer. This is going to be something that evolves, with community discussion, over time."

*The draft document, "Framework for Planning in the Future," is available at [www.mc-mncppc.org](http://www.mc-mncppc.org).*